**Telephone interview with Capt. Madeline Sebasky Kirby, Air Force flight nurse with the joint Air Force-Navy 1453rd Medical Air Evacuation Squadron during the Korean War. Conducted by Mr. Jan K. Herman, Historian, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, 27 December 2001.**

**Where are you from?**

I'm originally from Illinois, a little town called Westville, south of Champaign-Urbana.

**When did you decide you wanted to be a nurse?**

I guess around Pearl Harbor. I was working in a factory in Chicago and was ready to go to work. President Roosevelt came on the radio and declared war. The duck came down from the ceiling and told me that I was going to be a nurse. I know that sounds strange.

**Did you say duck?**

I say duck because . . . Did you ever watch the Groucho Marx show?

**Yes. Oh, the duck that came down from the ceiling with the question?**

That's right. I knew I wanted to get into the war but didn't know just what I wanted to do. I decided to be a nurse. I went through 3 years of nurse's training at St. Elizabeth Hospital in Danville, IL, about 7 miles from my home town. In my senior year I became a cadet nurse with the promise to go into the Army after graduation.

I graduated in '44, and got my commission in the Army in '45. I went to basic training at Camp McCoy, WI. Right after V-J Day we were on our way overseas on a Merchant Marine ship. We staged in the Philippines for a couple of months, and then I went on to Tokyo where I was part of the Army of Occupation. I was there from January of '46 until '47 when I got out. I knew I had to get out if I wanted to get into the Air Force because the Air Force became a separate service in '47. They had to process my papers shifting from one service to another.

Then I worked as a nurse in Duval County Hospital in Jacksonville, FL, when my orders came for the Air Force.

I then went to MacDill Field in Tampa for several months. They were going to open the base at Topeka, KS, so I and two other girls were sent to reopen the hospital there.

I wanted to go to flight school and finally got my orders to Randolph Field in San Antonio.

From flight school, my home base was Kelly Field. From Kelly, I flew the southern route carrying airevac patients up through Brookley AFB in Alabama, Warner-Robbins, GA, and then up the east coast to Westover AFB in Massachusetts. We had patients going both ways, getting them close to hospitals near their homes.

So, I had temporary duty there at Kelly, temporary duty at Westover, and then temporary duty at Travis in California. At that time, Travis was called Fairfield-Suisun AFB. I then came back to Kelly and flew to Westover where I got orders to return to Kelly because I was being sent PCS to Hickam in Hawaii. This was during the Korean War in 1950.

During the "Big Push" in July of '50, we also did a lot of flying. From the minute we got there, we didn't even have time to unpack. We were flying from Hickam to Japan by way of Midway or Wake. We used to refuel at either at Midway or Wake Island.

**You were flying C-54s?**

Yes. ‘54s. During the “Big Push” we had chartered aircraft from Pan Am along with the Royal Canadian Air Force. We would fly with anybody who had an airplane that could carry patients.

**How many patients could you get on a ‘54?**

A lot depended on the size of their casts, how much room they took up, and the number of ambulatory patients. You had patients confined to litters and those in partial body casts. You could carry about 50 patients if most of them were ambulatory.

**You were taking patients from Japan back to the states?**

Yes. We had another squadron that brought them from Korea to Itami outside Osaka. Our squadron, the 1453rd, picked them up at Itami and flew them up to Haneda in Tokyo. There the patients were screened again to see who could go on to the states and who would stay behind. We brought back several planeloads of frostbite patients in addition to other patients.

**What kind of medical procedures could you perform on these flights?**

We gave them their penicillin injections which, in those days, was administered every 4 hours. There were dressings to change and medications to be given. We had several feedings on some patients; they would have to be fed every hour. Some had chest wounds that had to be suctioned.

**Was this still 1950?**

The latter part of ‘50 and ‘51.

**So, you would have been seeing some of those patients from the Chosin Reservoir.**

Yes. We would fly them back by the same route via either Wake or Midway. We would refuel, feed the patients, change their dressings, and then go on to Hickam. There we’d off-load them overnight. Then they’d be put on another flight to come into the states at Travis AFB. From there they were brought on up the coast to hospitals close to their homes.

**Your squadron, the 1453rd, was a joint squadron with the Navy.**

Yes. We also had the RCAF (Royal Canadian Air Force) nurses with us. In fact, we were so short of nurses that the Army sent us a few. Of course, they weren’t trained in airevac procedures. So they worked in the office at our headquarters in Hickam.

**Do you recall any specific patients you may have treated?**

I kept my log book. It must have been in ‘52 when I was in a C-97 crash at Haneda. We crashed on takeoff when the landing gear collapsed. We had a full load of fuel aboard because we were going to overfly Midway or Wake and go straight into Hickam. It was raining and the runway was wet. We were taking off, the right landing gear collapsed, and the pilot reversed the props. That aircraft spun around and headed toward the seawall of the Sea of Japan and came to rest.

We had three patients who were injured. One was hit in the back by a piece of metal that pierced the fuselage and came up through his rubber mattress when the wing dragged on the runway. A piece of metal from the landing gear hit another patient in the shoulder. Another

patient suffered a mild heart attack. We had a nurse and two techs up front and a nurse and two techs in the back.

I was in the back, briefing one of the RCAF nurses. I could hear metal giving way, and the aircraft spinning. I prayed. Everybody was quiet. The crash crew came out and sprayed us, and we got the plane off loaded in a matter of minutes.

Two hours later, we were on another airplane heading to Hawaii with our original patients with the exception of the three who were injured.

**Were they badly injured?**

No. They remained in Tokyo.

**So, that was the closest call you ever had?**

Yes. But, you don't think about yourself at a time like that. All the years of training and all the procedures you've learned go through your mind. "What am I going to do when this thing settles down?" All you think about is how you're going to get the patients out of there.

**Had you been trained to get patients off loaded quickly in case of an emergency?**

Yes. We had been taught that in flight school. Off course, in flight school we had been training on C-47s. We didn't have any '54s or '97s. The '97s didn't come out until later.

**Did you ever fly with Bobbi Hovis on these missions?**

Bobbi and I were on what was called the "sucker list." In the service, they always say, "Don't volunteer for anything." Well, I never believed in that. I liked to volunteer so my name was on the volunteer list. Bobbi's must have been also because one time we both volunteered to fly to Maui. We participated in an air show. People came through and asked us questions about the aircraft and the patients we carried. The chamber of commerce then took us to lunch and filled the plane with exotic flowers.

**So, between your airevac flights you were showing off your planes?**

Right. This, of course, wasn't done during the "Big Push." At that time, we never got any crew rest. We rested when we were dead-heading. So, we were used to sleeping on the floor of the plane or the floor of any terminal we landed at. When we got to Wake or Midway it was usually in the middle of the night. As I recall, both places depended on desalinization for their water and so water was only available during certain parts of the day. When we got there there wasn't any so we had to do the best we could, drinking water out of lister bags.

We used to serve box lunches on our flights, and sometimes there wouldn't be enough of them and we had to split everything up.

**Normally, the box lunches would suffice for both the patients and the crew?**

Right. There were times when there would just barely be enough box lunches for the patients.

**But you must also have had some special feeding requirements for some of the patients.**

Yes. We screened the patients at the hospital, where special lunches were then prepared and packed.

**What was your rank at this point in your career?**
I as a 1st lieutenant. I made captain in '52.

**When did you leave the Air Force?**
I got out in February of '53. In those days you had to get out if you got married. And you had to get out if you were pregnant. I had gotten married in November of '52 and, by the time they got my papers straightened out, it was February of '53.

**How many years were you in altogether?**
I had 2 years in the Army and 5 years in the Air Force.

**What did you do after that?**
My husband, who was in the Marines, was instructing at Pensacola. We lived there until my daughter was born and then he got orders to Quantico when she was 3 months old. We then moved to Quantico. After that he was stationed at the Pentagon and then at the Naval Observatory with intelligence. He was a pilot and had a clearance for intelligence. During the Vietnam War he flew helicopters. He retired after 27 years.

**So you became a housewife when you got out and raised a family.**
That's right. I raised five children and now have 13 grandchildren. We ended up on this farm in Capron, VA. We raise cotton and peanuts.

**It's been close to 50 years since all that happened back in Korea. Do you ever think about that time.**
Yes, I think about it a lot. I love to write to my old flying buddies. I took a lot of pictures back then and my grandkids ask me about them and what happened back then. This year, the local historical society had a get together of Korean veterans and asked me to speak to the group. That was interesting. A lot of the fellows served, but, as you know, the women who served are in the minority, especially in this rural area.

The other day I was talking to a young woman who asked me what I did before I got married. I told her I was a flight nurse during the Korean War. She looked at me and said, "Korean War? When was that?"

It was an honor and a privilege to have served my country and I would do it again if I wasn't so darned old.